STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN RICK BOUCHER
Wise County Wireless Network Launch
Wise, Virginia
September 12, 2007

I am pleased to return to Wise this morning to join with Wise County officials in the formal launch of a truly innovative means of providing wireless high-speed Internet access to the residents and businesses in the Wise community. The new wireless network will be available to those within a 3 square mile area near the Town of Wise at no cost.

The wireless hotspot in Wise employs a new low-cost, highly efficient technology known as mesh networking to deliver high-speed wireless Internet access to residents and businesses in Wise. This cutting-edge technology holds great promise for our region. Last year I hosted well attended workshops in 3 locations across the District to provide information about mesh networking, and I would mention that Wise County Administrator Skip Skinner was among those who participated. Wise County will be the second locality in Southwest Virginia to employ mesh network architecture for its wireless services.

The economic success of rural communities has long been determined by access to major arteries of commerce. In earlier eras, proximity to canals, then railroads, and then major interstate highways determined the potential for economic development. In the 21st Century, broadband will become the major artery of commerce, and access to broadband services is critical for an economically successful community.

More than ten years ago, I encouraged local governments throughout the Ninth District to find a means of deploying broadband networks so that affordable high-speed Internet access would be available to businesses and residents throughout our region. My goal in making this recommendation was to set our region apart in comparison to other rural areas of the nation for the purpose of attracting industries seeking locations for expansion, attracting new companies with technology-based jobs, and aiding locally-owned small businesses in expanding operations.

Today, many Ninth District communities are making strides in the deployment of broadband networks with the construction of fiber-optic backbones; however, there are many homes and businesses that will not be reached by the fiber-optic backbone. This gap is commonly referred to as the "last mile," and wireless technology is an excellent means of deploying high-speed Internet services to bridge this gap. Wise County is now another model of how low cost Internet services can be offered virtually anywhere.

Equipment and labor costs for the construction of the new wireless network total approximately $20,000. Of that amount, Virginia/Kentucky Communications has provided $10,000, not including its labor costs. Virginia's Center for Innovative Technology has provided $4500 to the County for the purchase of switching equipment. The balance of the cost is being provided by the Wise County Board of Supervisors. The Board has made a $160,000 investment in the construction of LENOWISCO's fiber optic backbone.   The new wireless network is receiving its Internet signal through this fiber optic backbone. Virginia/Kentucky Communications is providing equipment and labor at no charge to the County in exchange for a portion of the bandwidth the County is leasing from LENOWISCO, Inc. Virginia/Kentucky Communications will maintain the new network after it is launched, and services will be available at no cost to residents, businesses, churches, UVA's College at Wise, as well as to the Courthouse. Visitors to Wise will also be able to access the network. The availability of high-speed Internet access at no cost will be an attractive feature to many travelers.

For some time, Wise County has sought to develop the relationship between its communities and UVA's College at Wise. The availability of wireless, highspeed Internet will help to bridge the gap between the college campus and downtown Wise. Now students who live off campus can have ready access to college information. Students will be able to sit in the outside commons areas of their off-campus apartments while accessing e-mail or preparing research papers.

In addition, mobile GIS equipment will enable the local fire department to better respond to fire emergencies. Firefighters will be better able to pinpoint the location of a fire emergency. They will be able to access remotely the location of fire hydrants near a fire. They will be able to determine the types of materials with which burning buildings were constructed, which will keep fire fighters safer and make them smarter in fighting fires.

There are numerous other applications which this network will make possible. Jack Kennedy, Wise County Circuit Court Clerk, and Ron Elkins, Wise County Commonwealth's Attorney, are working together to develop a cutting-edge law enforcement application. I look forward to hearing more about it when Jack and Ron unveil their plan on October 10.

Leading to today's formal launch, Virginia/Kentucky Communications has installed router modules here at the Wise County Courthouse, Hospital Hill, and at the Lonesome Pine Business and Technology Park. Coverage from the Courthouse includes part of Masonic Avenue to Railroad Avenue near the Wise Rescue Squad Building to the Main intersection with Norton Road. Coverage from Hospital Hill includes off-campus student apartments below the Town's water tanks, part of the top of Ridgefield Road and part of Orchard Lane. Coverage from the Tech Park will include Sykes and Verizon as well as the Lonesome Pine Airport Terminal and tarmac. UVA's College at Wise is working in coordination with the Wise WiFi network and will be adding its own routers in public areas around campus, including the Student Center, Darden Hall, Smiddy Hall lobby, and Bowers-Sturgill Conference Room.

LENOWISCO, Inc. is providing the backbone for this system, which will allow the modules to transmit wireless Internet services in a three square mile area. For a high-quality indoor signal, residents and businesses will need outside antennas to capture the wireless signal to transmit it within a building.

The mesh units are small and relatively inexpensive. Because they communicate with each other wirelessly, each becomes a point from which the network can be expanded outward. Accordingly, Wise County can easily expand its community network in any direction simply by adding easy to install units.

In the next year, the County will expand the wireless network to the Town of Big Stone Gap to build its relationship with Mountain Empire Community College. Other Towns in Wise County will be added into the network after Big Stone Gap. Eventually, all of Wise County will be able to access the Internet through the wireless network.

I would like to take the opportunity of these remarks to recognize a number of individuals who have been instrumental in the launch we celebrate today.

First, I want to commend the Wise County Board of Supervisors for their leadership and foresight in bringing this cutting-edge technology to Wise County.

I want to thank Jack Kennedy, the Clerk of the Circuit Court for Wise County, for his continued and outstanding leadership in the area of information technology. Jack's foresight and dedication to the advancement of technology for Wise County and for the region are to be commended. Today's event typifies the commitment which he has shown to the use of technology for the improvement of our region's educational and economic development opportunities.

I also want to recognize Skip Skinner, County Administrator, for his efforts to bring this new service to Wise, as well as Steve Blankenbeckler with Virginia/Kentucky Communications, who has built the wireless network.

The new wireless network we officially launch today marks another major step forward in our work to improve the quality of life for Southwest Virginians. I want to commend all here for the success of the project and offer special congratulations to the residents and business owners in Wise who will benefit tremendously from the new service that is now available to them.